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SUBJECT: HONDURAS NATIONAL REGISTRY OF PERSONS: ORGANIZATIONAL
REFORM HAS VARIED RIPPLE EFFECT

REFTEL (A) Tegucigalpa 1181
(B) Tegucigalpa 1124 and previous

¶1. Summary: In early June, the Honduran National Congress discussed amending Article 54 of the Constitution in order to make changes in the directorate of the National Registry of Persons (RNP), the GOH's civil registry. The RNP has often been used as a political tool and the proposed changes were meant to rotate the organization's directorate and balance the power more evenly among individuals in charge. However, among the proposed changes was an amendment to strip the organization of its autonomy, a step back in the effort to de-politicize the RNP. Congress may finalize these changes now that it has returned from recess July 4, but the recent scandal involving two Cameroonians who obtained false passports has brought a new sense of urgency to the need for reform in this area. The ability for people to unlawfully obtain documents through the RNP compounds the political issues by creating a situation in which fraudulent documents could potentially be used as part of trafficking in persons or for the purpose of fraudulently obtaining U.S. visas using an assumed identity. Meaningful change in the RNP thus becomes a pressing matter not only of electoral integrity, but also of human rights and national security. End Summary.

¶2. The National Register of Persons (RNP) was formerly part of the National Electoral Tribunal, until it became an independent entity in 2003 electoral reforms in order to separate it from the newly created Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). The RNP is the body responsible for registering persons into a national database and administering vital personal documents such as birth and death certificates and the national identity card, known as a "cedula". Currently, Congress elects a director and two sub-directors to head the organization.

¶3. Given the current method of electing the organization's directorate, the reforms of 2003 did not serve to de-politicize the RNP. The national identity card is requisite for voting in Honduras, but many Honduran citizens have not received their identity documents in time for elections, and corrupt politicians have allegedly been able to use their influence to gain votes from unregistered, or in some cases deceased, persons by providing false identity documents to their supporters. As a June 20 editorial from "La Prensa" states: "The issuance of personal documents has been almost exclusively conditioned by electoral demands."

¶4. The need for institutional reform at the RNP was a topic under discussion at the last session of the Honduran National Congress that recessed in June, in which the following changes were proposed: 1) restructuring of the directorate to replace the director and two sub-directors with three directors, representative of the five different political parties (these directors would be hierarchically indistinct but would be assigned differing technical, administrative and executive duties); 2) placing the directorate on a one year rotation; and 3) suspending the phrase "autonomous" from the RNP's mandate (Article 54 of the Honduran Constitution). The last proposed change would reverse the effect of decentralizing the RNP.

This begs the question of who the RNP will answer to if it is re-centralized and, consequently, whose political will it may be made to serve. The argument made by Congress to justify this shift was that the RNP cannot be considered an autonomous, decentralized institution according to their Law of Public Administration, in part because Congress elects its directors. Here, then, it becomes apparent that, while rotating membership (as is done at the TSE) could be an important step towards alleviating the political pressures placed on the RNP, stripping away the organization's autonomy is likely to only politicize it further.

15. Politicization and corruption in the RNP may also have serious ramifications beyond electoral issues. The June 9 detention of two Cameroonian citizens who had obtained Honduran passports brought many of these issues to a head (reftels). According to a June 16 article in "El Tiempo", thousands of Hondurans have never registered for their identity cards. As a result, those who provide false documentation can register a non-Honduran under the name of someone who has yet to register. The trafficker providing the documentation must have a contact within the RNP who has access to the database. This allows the person receiving the documents to be prepped on the correct answers about their family history, etc., which then allow them to register and apply for an identity card. Individuals with fraudulent documentation are then able to apply for Honduran passports, which they can use to travel to a third country and often to apply for a visa to travel to the U.S.

16. The current case that has brought this issue to the fore is not believed to be isolated. Julian Suazo, the RNP's current director claims to be taking drastic measures to end the practice of identity theft and trafficking of birth certificates. He also promised to name publicly those officials involved in these practices. The first person implicated in the case involving the Cameroonians was Yuri Rolando Castellanos Suazo, the RNP window employee who helped register the individuals found later with falsified documents.

According to a June 22 article in "El Tiempo" and the RNP, the following three individuals were also later fired from their positions in the RNP for involvement in this or other incidents of document falsification: Carlota Matute Zelaya, Norma Lidia Morales, and Carlos Roberto Hernandez. It is clear, however, that this problem goes far beyond this isolated case and this handful of employees. As of June 22, RNP Director Suazo had submitted at least 15 other cases to the Public Ministry for investigation. Suazo has also promised to make other changes in the RNP in order to prevent non-Hondurans from fraudulently obtaining identity documents. These measures are to include: rotating key personnel, applying stricter internal security measures, and performing an audit of the company in charge of issuing the national identification cards.

17. A June 22 article in "El Pais" illustrates another facet of the RNP's problems: a lack of sufficient resources. The article explains that 600 applications for "cedulas", or national ID cards, sent from San Pedro Sula have been returned to the capital because of irregularities stemming from the fact that the RNP's database in San Pedro Sula has not been updated for four years. The "weak point" of the system, according to the article, is that other cities cannot check fingerprints and other information against the database in Tegucigalpa, which is up-to-date. This issue is being rectified in San Pedro Sula, and ID applications have been suspended until the database is updated.

18. Comment: Endemic corruption in the RNP, as well as Congressional political pressures on the RNP, are a threat to the Honduran electoral process, as the national ID card is needed to vote and is often used as a political tool. Furthermore, this issue encompasses problems of human rights and national security as smugglers can use false documents to engage in trafficking in persons, and individuals can apply for a U.S. visa using an assumed identity. The Charge's decision to temporarily suspend visa appointments (reftel A) will hopefully ensure that current investigations lead to meaningful changes in the RNP. It remains to be seen, however, if the organizational structure itself will undergo sufficient rehabilitation to become a properly functioning organization that can protect electoral integrity and both the U.S. and Honduras' national security. So far, investigations into the current scandal have focused on those employees who administer documents and register individuals. While it is necessary to

reprimand all involved in providing fraudulent documents, this approach is not likely to correct the institutional pathologies at the root of the RNP's problems. The reconvened Congress will discuss the proposed changes to the RNP. In light of the scandal that has come forth since Congress went into recess, this discussion will take on an even greater level of significance.

19. Comment continued: The RNP is badly in need of reform in order to: a) de-politicize the selection of its directorate to guard against irregularities in personal identity documents at election time, and b) prevent employees from making deals with traffickers of fraudulent documents. As long as Congress is responsible for selecting the RNP's directors and does so in a political manner, it will be nearly impossible to ensure that the body is apolitical and accountable. For current internal investigations to truly provide change in the organization's activities, they must be prepared to look at problems inherent in all levels of administration. End Comment.

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